MILTON'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN

by

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Milton lived in a period of transition affecting many aspects of life, among them the status of women. Age-old conservative beliefs were still alive and had a temporary resurgence under the Puritan hegemony, but liberal forces were also at work.

The poet had the misfortune to be involved in a particularly unhappy marriage. After a youth spent largely in study, with little contact with young women, he hastily married an immature Royalist bride, Mary Powell. Her refusal to return to Milton after she had left him in the early months of the marriage to visit her family suggests that Milton and Mary Powell were incompatible from the start. Though there was a reconciliation later, Milton's relationship with her, her whole family, and, after her death, her children as well, was replete with friction and bitterness. Two later marriages were more successful, but evidently did little to erase the hurt Milton received in the first one.

An understanding of Milton's attitude toward women is helped by examination of some contemporaneous materials which he must have known. Chief among these is the Bible, which Milton approached with ostensible reverence, but which he handled with unusual independence because as a Christian rationalist, he was convinced that nothing in the Bible could be incompatible with what he considered reasonable. The result is what seems at times a wilful wresting of Scripture to his own purposes. His estimate of woman seems harsher than that of St. Paul, with an overwhelming emphasis on her subservience to man. Milton, as a leading

Puritan, must also have known the popular Puritan domestic handbooks. William Whately's A Bride-Bush may be taken as a fairly typical example; in it one finds conscientious exhortation to husbandly love, care, and responsibility, but at the same time, callous insistence upon the wife's role of complete subjection to her husband, no matter what the circumstances. Nevertheless, Elizabethan women had demonstrated their capability as sturdy helpmeets in their husbands' businesses and had gained much independence in worldly affairs. This seeming presumption on their part aroused much controversy in Milton's lifetime, and a growing number of serious and able defenders were taking up the infant crusade for women's rights. In these pioneers Milton showed no interest, in spite of his liberal views on many other subjects.

Milton's own works show an ambivalence in his attitude toward women. Clearly he is attracted by feminine charm and honors his ideal of womanhood fulfilling a prescribed role with grace. But he also seems to betray outright dislike of women in certain remarks in the divorce tracts, in the characterization of Eve in Paradise Lost, and in the handling of Dalila in Samson Agonistes.

One explanation of this apparent misogyny may possibly be found in Milton's thorough espousal of the concept of hierarchy; this ideal, as well as his personal self-esteem, received a heavy blow in his misalliance with Mary Powell. In the disobedience of Eve and Dalila Milton saw a threat to the whole hierarchical order of the universe. This is one explanation of the importance which Milton's attitude toward women has in the study of his works.

Introduction

John Milton was fated to be born at a point in time when the cross currents of an age were meeting with turbulent effect in many significant areas of human affairs. It was a time of disintegration of the old and working out of the new, and among the aspects of life most deeply affected was the relationship between man and woman. This relationship had remained practically static for many centuries, based upon a rigid concept of the role of each sex. All the weight of church, state, and mores had been brought to bear to insure the preservation of the status quo, especially in the role of woman. Yet such a basic relationship could not by its very nature be held indefinitely in a fixed state when dynamic change was going on all about; inevitably the concept of woman was subject to change as well.

The Elizabethan woman, basking in the reflected glow of a universally acclaimed female monarch, managed to obscure for a time the prevailing attitude of suspicion of all of Eve's daughters for the sin of Eve. A goodly number of well-born ladies, including the queen herself, made excellent use of the opportunity offered by exceptional parents to acquire learning. Lady Jane Grey, Margaret More, and Anne Cooke, mother of Francis Bacon, were among those who commanded respect by reason of their scholarly and linguistic accomplishments. At the same time, the good wives of that sturdy middle class which was England's special strength attained to a remarkable position of practical regard by virtue of the current economic circumstances. As shall be demonstrated later, gaining a livelihood was then a family affair in which the wife played a role of substantial usefulness.

With the accession of James I, however, the very real gains that women had made were endangered and in some cases surrendered in the face of pent-up reaction. James himself was hostile toward women and especially toward their intellectual aspirations. The anti-feminist attitude, shown in such a diatribe as John Knox's The Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558), near the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, had been suppressed to give way to flowery tributes to the Virgin Queen. However, it burst out again ~~in~~ full force in a spate of popular anti-feminist tracts. Scandals involving women in James's court added fuel to the controversy.

As Milton grew to adulthood, the status of women was a topic of consuming and widespread interest. In spite of their antipathy to the ecclesiastical establishment, the Puritan writers were on the whole just as dogmatic as the medieval churchmen had been about the inferiority of women; yet here and there a few voices began to protest. Profound changes in the economic picture were also under way, having drastic implications for the vigorous business women of the previous generation.

Into the midst of this ferment of thinking on the subject of women came John Milton, himself uniquely endowed as an independent and iconoclastic thinker, and endowed as well with a highly passionate and sensitive nature. The impact of his personal encounters with womankind left unmistakable effects in the body of his artistic creations. The first section of this paper will take up an examination of the biographical facts concerning these relationships. It will be useful to explore next the prime source of most of the traditional views, the Bible, for the light it may shed upon Milton's attitude. Other pertinent factors

to be considered include the actual evolving status of woman in relation to the home and the business world, controversial pamphlets of the time, and the Puritan domestic handbooks. Milton's own ambivalent views will then be demonstrated from various of his works. Finally, it will be shown that although Milton was aware of the many contemporaneous factors indicated, he was more deeply influenced by certain very basic personal concepts in his inner struggle over the proper role of woman. These considerations combine to show that Milton's artistic creations are significantly influenced by his attitude toward women.

I.

Biographical Data

Very little information is available concerning the first woman in Milton's life, his mother. It is known only that her name was Sarah Jeffreys, that she was the daughter of a merchant tailor, and that her sister was for a time a household domestic, the inference being that she must have been from a fairly humble station in life. There is no record of a dowry or inheritance.[1] Milton's nephew, Edward Philips, testified of her that she was a woman of "incomparable virtue and goodness,"[2] and Milton himself once wrote that she was known throughout the parish for her good works.[3] The influence of this evidently retiring and self-effacing woman cannot be known, but it is quite clear that it was Milton's father who took the more active and direct interest in his son's education and career.[4]

The very paucity of any further references to feminine contacts in the years of Milton's youth is significant. He was a student at a boy's grammar school, St. Paul's School, and had private tutoring at home. He must have had a normally affectionate relationship with his only sister, Anne, for at age seventeen he wrote the touching poem, "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough," concerning her child, and later he took her two boys into his household to educate them. But at this time his own testimony is that he deliberately withdrew to some extent from distracting society to devote himself to contemplation and

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1 James Holly Hanford, John Milton, Englishman (New York, 1949), p. 7.
2 "The Life of Mr. John Milton," The Student's Milton, ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York, 1961), p. xxxii.
3 "From the Second Defence," Patterson, p. 1145.
4 Ibid., p. 1145; see also Latin poem "To My Father," Patterson, p. 101.

study.[1] The following lines from "Lycidas" are a famous expression of Milton's creed in this regard, though it is phrased as a rhetorical question in a mood of pretended doubt:

> Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
> To tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade,
> And strictly meditate the thankles Muse,
> Were it not better don as others use,
> To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair? (64-69)

Again, in the Latin Elegy VI, "To Charles Diodati," is found one of the early expressions of complete dedication to high purpose which are so characteristic of Milton:

> But the poet who sings of wars and of heaven..., that poet should live sparingly as did the Samian teacher and should find in herbs his simple food. Let the crystal water stand beside him in a beechen cup, and let him drink only sober draughts from a pure spring. Let him have, in addition, a youth chaste and free from evil, uncompromising standards, and stainless hands.[2]

This is not to say, however, that he lived the life of a monk, completely cut off from worldly contacts. Entries in his commonplace book show that he did give some thought to the celibate state of the clergy, but came to the conclusion that it was not for him.[3] Though, as in Latin Elegy I, "To Charles Diodati," he might be "wholly absorbed in my books, which, indeed, constitute my life," still, he is able to say, "When I am weary, I am rapt away by the pageantry of the rounded theatre," or even on fine spring days passes some hours outdoors in a pleasant spot, watching groups of maidens go by, stars breathing soft flames."[4] Again, in

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1 "From the Second Defense," Patterson, p. 1145.
2 Patterson, p. 92.
3 Arthur Barker, Milton and the Puritan Dilemma (Toronto, 1942), p. 64
4 Patterson, pp. 85-86.

Elegy VII, he notices particularly one of these young women, but he remains a detached onlooker and never saw her again.

The only other women mentioned in his youth are a certain Leonora, the subject of some Latin epigrams, and Emilia, of the Italian sonnets. The poems are charming and graceful, but show no real acquaintance with the ladies concerned.

Milton thus arrived at mature manhood with very little familiarity with the opposite sex, his contacts having been either at a distance or at best in the polite but rather formal context of the intellectual and musical groups he enjoyed as recreation. He had deliberately chosen to devote himself to his studies, and thus avoided much of the adolescent contact that helps shape a mature judgment in these matters. In An Apology for Smectymnuus, Milton expounds at length how he learned about chastity and love from the pages of "lofty fables and romances, ...the divine volumes of Plato, and his equal Xenophon,"[1] rather than from the more unsavory means of which his enemies accused him. Suddenly, at the age of thirty-three, came the events recounted so vividly in the words of Edward Philips, then a boy of eleven residing in Milton's household.

> About Whitsuntide it was, or a little after, that he took a journey into the country; nobody about him certainly knowing the reason, or that it was any more than a journey of recreation; after a month's stay, home he returns a married man, that went out a bachelor....[2]

To anyone acquainted with Milton's intense seriousness about the high purpose of his life, the precipitateness of this action is nearly incredible. If, as there is no reason to suppose otherwise, the canons

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[1] Patterson, p. 549.
[2] Ibid., p. xxxvii.

requiring the reading of the banns for three successive Sundays were observed, the choice of the betrothed must have been even more hasty than first appears. The bride was sixteen year old Mary Powell, party-loving daughter of an avowed Royalist.[1]

The new Mrs. Milton brought with her to the Milton ménage a gay group of relatives and friends, and for a short time the merry round to which she was accustomed persisted.[2] Then, inevitably, the bride was left to settle down to domesticity, but after "she had for a month or thereabout led a philosophical life (after having been used to a great house, and much company and joviality), her friends, possibly incited by her own desire, made earnest suit by letter, to have her company the remaining part of the summer."[3] Milton, no doubt in some perplexity, granted the permission, on condition that she return in the autumn. The appointed time came and went with no news of the young Mrs. Milton; Milton's letters went unanswered, and finally a messenger from him was contemptuously rebuffed by the Powells.[4]

The desertion of Mary Powell was a catastrophe injected into the resolutely organized life of the poet from which, the indications are, he never completely recovered.

The next years were occupied with the production of the several tractates on divorce; the first, The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, appeared the next year after the marriage, in 1643. A revision followed in six months, then in 1644, The Judgment of Martin Bucer, and in 1645, Tetrachordon and Colasterion. Meanwhile, Milton's father came to live with him, and several

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[1] Perhaps some slight previous acquaintance may be adduced from the fact that Mary Powell's father had for some time owed Milton's father a debt of money.
[2] Philips, in Patterson, p. xxxvii.
[3] Ibid., p. xxxvii.
[4] Ibid., p. xxxvii.

more students were added to the group Milton was teaching. He found pleasure at this time in the company of the Lady Margaret Ley, to whom he wrote a sonnet in tribute to her virtue; but also, Philips says, he was paying suit to "a very handsome and witty gentlewoman,"[1] who declined the interest offered by a married man. For married he was, all protest notwithstanding, and yet he was at the same time in a sense not really married, but suffering an enforced second bachelorhood.

In 1645, after three years of a frustration endured with feelings which can only be conjectured from the hints in the divorce tracts, Milton was induced to take his wife back. Philips attributes the Powells' change-about to political expediency, since after Naseby the Royalists were in a rather dire situation, and a son-in-law who was a rising figure in the Puritan elite would be a most valuable asset.[2] Whatever the motive, it took a bit of doing, with a tearful confrontation scene being maneuvered in the home of one of Milton's London acquaintances. We cannot possibly know whether Milton's reluctant consent came from a sense of duty, from true generosity and forgiveness, or from a realization that even Mary Powell was better than no wife at all.

Milton had just engaged a larger house anyway, so the couple moved in, along with the already considerable ménage that surrounded him. The next year Anne Milton was born; she was to be a near invalid all her life. At about the same time, the Powells' fears were realized, their estate was sequestered, and the whole family moved in with the Miltons---father, mother, and several brothers and sisters. The elder Powell seems to have

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[1] Patterson, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.
[2] Ibid., p. xxxviii.

been a n'er-do-well schemer, and was involved in much litigation, some of it with Milton himself over the long unpaid debt. Milton knew also that he would never see the £1000 dower promised with Mary Powell.[1]

The abrasion of the close association with so many tiresome, uncongenial people on the soul of the sensitive artist, who all his life had disciplined his time and his associations so severely, must have been considerable. In a letter to Carlos Dati, he complains bitterly of 'the persons, though in no other respect commendable, who sit daily in my company, weary me, nay, by heaven, all but plague me to death whenever they are jointly in the humour for it.'[2] Milton was in the midst of some of his most important political writing. Symptoms of blindness that had begun in 1644 were increasing inexorably. Milton's kindly and understanding father died; another daughter, Mary, arrived in 1648, and then a son, John, in 1651; the elder Powell died also.[3] The Powells moved out, but Powell's widow vigorously pursued the litigation against Milton. [4] Some hints indicate that she may have been instrumental in her daughter's earlier departure, and also in her return;[5] her point of view may be surmised by a notation of her lawyer on some of the legal papers pertaining to the case: 'Mr. Milton is a harsh and choleric man, and married Mrs. Powell's daughter, who would be undone if any such course [further legal action] were taken against him by Mrs. Powell, he having turned away his wife heretofore.'[6] In 1651, Milton's blindness was

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1 Hanford, p. 126.
2 David Masson, The Life of John Milton (London, 1873), III, p. 652.
3 Hanford, p. 156.
4 Ibid., p. 156.
5 Anthony Wood, Fasti Oxoniensis, in Patterson, p. xxviii.
6 Hanford., p. 156.

complete, and his general health was poor. In the next year, the last daughter, Deborah, was born; Mary Powell did not survive childbirth; and, a final bitter blow, Milton's only son, the infant John, sickened and died.[1]

The end of 1652 found John Milton a blind widower in reduced circumstances with three small children on his hands, one of them a cripple, and his mother-in-law implacably alienated against him. The years of association with Mary Powell had brought him nothing but friction and trouble, and the three daughters of Mary Powell were to serve as living reminders of his fatal entanglement to the end of his life.

Katharine Woodcock was the next woman to appear in the record of Milton's life, and the indications are that the brief time with her was the happiest of his marital experiences. The marriage took place in 1656, but only a year and four months went by before the second Mrs. Milton was in her grave, and her infant with her.[2] The poignancy of this loss, and of the poet's blindness, which prevented his ever seeing her, was best expressed by Milton himself in the sonnet that is thought to be about her, "On His Deceased Wife." It ends:

> Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd
> So clear, as in no face with more delight.
> But, O, as to embrace me she inclin'd,
> I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.

What a pity that this evidently happy union could not have lasted! Katharine Woodcock's death must have compounded the hurt that Milton's vulnerability in love had already brought him, whereas some years of tranquility with her might have healed it.

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[1] Hanford, p. 156.
[2] Ibid., p. 163.

Again Milton was left on his own to manage his household as best he could with hired help. Even this had to be reduced at the Restoration, when he lost his position in the government. He could no longer afford the professional secretary who for so long had been his eyes, transcribing what Milton dictated to him, and reading aloud the scholarly works that were the indispensable food of Milton's creative genius.[1] The lifelong discord with the daughters, now fourteen, twelve, and eight, began at this time, when he attempted to use the girls to supply his need for readers. Edward Philips, still a member of the household, recounts what happened:

> ...Excusing only the eldest daughter by reason of her bodily infirmity and difficult utterance of speech (which to say the truth I doubt was the principal cause of excusing her), the other two were condemned to the performance of reading, and exactly pronouncing of all the languages of whatever book he should at one time or other think fit to peruse; viz. the Hebrew (and I think the Syriac), the Greek, the Latin, the Italian, Spanish, and French. All which sorts of books to be confined to read, without understanding one word, must needs be a trial of patience almost beyond endurance; yet it was endured by both for a long time. Yet the irksomeness of this employment could not be always concealed, but broke out more and more into expressions of uneasiness; so that at length they were all (even the eldest also) sent out to learn some curious and ingenious sorts of manufacture, that are proper for women to learn, particularly embroideries in gold and silver. It had been happy indeed, if the daughters of such a person had been made in some measure inheritrixes of their father's learning; but since fate otherwise decreed, the greatest honor that can be ascribed to this now living (and so would be to the others, had they lived) is to be daughter to a man of his extraordinary character.[2]

It is interesting that Philips, living in the same era as Milton, and subject to many of the same currents of opinion, should have thought it

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[1] Hanford, p. 166.
[2] Philips, in Patterson, p. xlii.

regrettable and a bit remarkable that Milton did not educate his daughters. Evidently he made no attempt to improve their minds beyond the usual minimum, and is said to have remarked, 'One tongue is enough for a woman.'[1]

In the years that the young women remained at home there was little if any peace and harmony in their relationship with their father. Some of the bitter phrases of the divorce tracts must have echoed again in the mind of the aging and ailing poet: "uncomplying discord of nature," "image of earth and phlegm." The testimony of a maidservant in the house was that the daughters tried to cheat their father in the handling of money for household needs, and that they on one occasion tried to dispose of some of his books to the "dunghill woman."[2] When there was talk of the forthcoming marriage with Elizabeth Minshull, one of the daughters is reported to have said ~~she knew~~ that the proposed marriage was no news but 'if she could hear of his death, that was something.'[3] Milton seems to have been as completely incompatible with the Powell brood as he had been with their mother.

Elizabeth Minshull was twenty-four and Milton fifty-five when their marriage was arranged by Milton's good friend, Dr. Nathaniel Paget.[4] The third Mrs.Milton was evidently a quiet and dutiful wife, devoted to her husband, and a source of much comfort to him. The wrangling household was restored to peace and order. John Aubrey calls her "a gentle person, a peaceful and agreeable humour."[5] The relationship of husband and wife was

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1 Hanford, pp. 232-233.
2 Ibid. p. 234.
3 Ibid., p. 168
4 Philips, in Patterson, p. xli.
5 "Minutes of the Life of Mr. John Milton," in Patterson, p. xxiii.

scarcely the ideally blended intellectual and physical harmony described in the divorce tracts, but, as Hanford expresses it, "Milton had long since discovered and accepted the efficacy of another love. He had dwelt with Eve in Eden and he received the nightly visitations of the muse."[1]

The maid, Elizabeth Fisher, kept her ears open one day when Milton's brother Christopher, a lawyer, was visiting him; she overheard the poet dictate his will, and she signed it as a witness. In it Milton left Mary Powell's uncollectable dowry of £1000 to the daughters as their only inheritance from him, calling them "undutiful."[2] Obviously, the bitter revulsion against everything associated with Mary Powell still ruled him. It seems a doubly harsh bequest when one remembers the plight of unmarried women at that time, whatever their education, in the light of the very limited opportunities for employment open to them, and also the fact that one of the daughters was physically afflicted in some way. One can hope that the Powell family made some provision for them, but it is not very likely, in view of their precarious finances through the years. However, Donald H. Stevens, in his monograph Milton Papers, [3] says they were able to overcome the will.

Milton's will further stated, "All the residue of my estate (other than the non-existent dowry) I leave to the disposal of Elizabeth, my loving wife."[4] This was the fulfillment of the promises he had made more than once in the hearing of the maids, Elizabeth and Mary Fisher. They reported that Milton once said to his wife, 'Make much of me as long as I live, for thou knowest I have given thee all when I die at thy disposal,'

1 Hanford, p. 169.
2 Donald Harrison Stevens, Milton Papers (Chicago, 1927), p. 7.
3 Ibid., p. 7
4 Hanford, 236-237

and at another time, when he was particularly pleased with his meal, 'God have mercy, Betty, I see thou wilt perform according to thy promise in providing me such dishes as I think fit whilst I live, and when I die thou knowest that I have left thee all.'[1]

How pathetic indeed that the man whose artistic creations treat so often and so idealistically of the heavenly harmony of marriage, should be reduced in the blindness and pain of his old age to bargaining for his comfort with the promise of his earthly possessions. Probably it was not at all necessary to bribe the good and devoted Betty in this way, but it is indicative of Milton's attitude toward women that he seemed to think that it was, enough to mention it, not once, but several times, in the hearing of others.

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[1] Hanford, 236-237.

II.

Contemporaneous Materials

It will be useful to explore some contemporaneous materials and circumstances for the bearing which they have on Milton's concept of women. First among these is the Bible. As a Protestant and a Puritan, Milton was irrevocably committed to the Bible as his guide in all questions of faith and conduct. Certainly he felt this obligation, as witness his use of Biblical texts interpreted by enlightened reason as the only conceivable base for his arguments on divorce, and his use of Biblical subjects for all his major poetical works, in spite of the attractiveness of various other secular subjects to him. How faithful was he to the letter and spirit of his avowed guide? The answer to this question must be framed in the light of Milton's Christian rationalism, which shapes his basic approach to the whole problem. But the answer has interesting implications in his attitude toward women.

A close perusal of the divorce tracts reveals that whatever particular passage of Scripture is under discussion, Milton's interpretation of it seems to begin with the premise, "This does not necessarily mean exactly what it says, if the proposition would then be unreasonable, for God simply would not be unreasonable." He says, for example, "God being a pure spirit, could not command a thing repugnant to his own nature,"[1] and he also appeals to the "fundamental and superior laws of nature and of charity, to which all other ordinances give up their seals."[2]

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[1] "Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," Patterson, p. 599.
[2] Ibid., p. 613.

This method then gives him a clear field to declare what his conception of God's nature or these laws is. The difficulty with all this that though God is the quintessence of reason and wisdom, He is not always pleased to let man in on the workings of His mind, so to speak. In the words of St. Paul, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?"[1] The fact that God's mind is superior to all human minds (even Milton's!) opens the possibility that some of his actions may not--and indeed often do not-- make sense in the finite human view. This is the situation in which the Christian is asked to exercise faith, and to say with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him,"[2] or to be satisfied, like St. Paul, with the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee."[3] Indeed, both Job, magnificent in his sufferings, and Paul, serving God tirelessly in spite of the thorn in the flesh he had begged God to remove, are examples of man's willingness to trust God in spite of His inscrutability in His dealings with man.

Yet Milton, finding himself encumbered with an uncongenial wife, cries out endlessly that his situation is intolerable. It is true that he bears his gout and his blindness with admirable patience, but the enforced association and the limitation of freedom stemming from his unwise marriage are something else again. Physical suffering he can endure, but mental and spiritual affliction moves him to protest. His confidence, or, more accurately, his pride, in his own intellect is so great that he is

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1 Romans 11:33-34.
2 Job 13:15.
3 II Cor. 12:9.

positive that if an affliction seems unreasonable to him, then it must be so, and any Scripture to the contrary simply could not mean what it says. Thus, Milton takes the passage at Deuteronomy 24:1,2, in which the Mosaic law allowed a man to dismiss his wife if "he hath found some uncleanness in her," and using the word "uncleanness," he stretches it to mean "any defect, annoyance, or ill quality in nature, which to be joined with, makes life tedious,"[1] claiming this as sufficient cause for divorce. He takes Christ's words in Matthew 19:9: "And I say unto you, whoso shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery," and interprets them as follows:

> For the language of scripture signifies by fornication (and others besides St. Austin so expounded it) not only the trespass of body, nor perhaps that between married persons, unless in a degree or quality as shameless as the bordello; but signifies also any notable disobedience, or intractable carriage of the wife to the husband....Secondly, signifies the apparent alienation of mind not to idolatry,...but far on this side, to any point of will worship, though to the true God; sometimes it notes the love of earthly things, or worldly pleasures....[2]

St. Paul, in I Corinthians 7:15, seems to Milton to give permission to divorce in the passage that depends on the phrase, "if the unbelieving depart"; Milton says: "I take therefore 'departing' to be as large as the negative of being well pleased; that is, if he be not pleased for the present to live lovingly, quietly, inoffensively, so as may give good hope."[3] These examples are sufficient to show Milton's method

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1 "Tetrachordon," Patterson, p. 667.
2 Ibid., p. 691.
3 Ibid., p. 699.

of taking the key word of a Scriptural pronouncement and explaining it away, to all practical purposes, with complete disregard for its plain sense when viewed with detached reason.

Milton's excuses in taking this terrific latitude are, first, as mentioned before, that he is going by a higher law of nature than can be known by the "letter-bound servility of the canon doctors";[1] and, second, that the Gospel requirements are less severe than those of the Old Testament (See "Doctrine and Discipline," Book I, Chapters 1, 6, 7; Book II, Chapters 6, 7, 22; "Tetrachordon," in Patterson, pp. 652-653, 675, 686). This latter is at least a partial truth, for St. Paul wrote the whole book of Galatians to drive home to legalistic Christians the concept that faith in Christ frees one from the burden of the ceremonial law, and most important, from the necessity of attempting to earn salvation by works. But Milton is forgetting the other side of the coin, Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount:

> Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill;...But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment; Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery; But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart;

and so on, again and again, until finally:

> You have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.[2]

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[1] "Doctrine and Discipline," Patterson, p. 620.
[2] Matthew 5:21, 22, 27, 43, 44.

In each case Christ sets a higher standard than the Mosaic law. At the end, He cites the only higher law worth appealing to, the higher law of love, and its demands are so impossibly difficult that there is no real comparison with the law of Moses; yet Christ expects obedience to it, expects men to go against their own nature in exercising love when it is not deserved and not returned. The alleviating feature of this dilemma is that Christ gives the power to overcome the ordinary natural reactions of personality, to turn the other cheek, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Thus, the requirements of the New Testament are not <u>easier</u> than those of the Old, but immensely more difficult, so much so as to be impossible of fulfillment by anyone in his own strength, no matter how strenuous his efforts to attain righteousness by keeping the law. "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."[1] This is all sound basic Puritan doctrine, to which a simple, devout believer like John Bunyan would subscribe without reservation.

But John Milton could not see it. He was so filled with his own disappointment and righteous indignation that he could not conceive that a remedy for what he saw as an unendurable injustice must not be immediately forthcoming. He speaks at length of the law of charity,[2]

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[1] Romans 8:3,4.
[2] "Tetrachordon," Patterson, p. 675.

but he seems to understand by it unlimited freedom of the Christian to act in his own interest regardless of restraining ordinances. He goes on to declare flatly that "the great and almost only commandment of the gospel is, to command nothing against the good of man,"[1] a very dangerous principle when the man concerned is the sole judge of his own good and feels free to dismiss contrary advice with such declarations as "Christ meant not to be taken word for word."[2] Thus we conclude that in the divorce tracts Milton perverted both his ostensible authority, the Bible, and his vaunted tool of interpretation, reason, because of the rebellion of his inner feelings against not only his unhappy marriage, but also the unfortunate cause of it, Mary Powell.

A useful comparison may also be made between the concept of woman in Milton's mature works and that in the New Testament, especially in the writings of St. Paul, who, we must grant, at times shows a rather restrained enthusiasm toward the sex, to say the least. It is tempting to wonder if St. Paul had himself encountered a Mary Powell at some point! Be that as it may, his letters contain many allusions to the intelligent, energetic women among his converts, showing his respect and appreciation for them and for their labors for Christ:

> I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you; for she hath

1 "Tetrachordon," Patterson, p. 675.
2 "Doctrine and Discipline," Patterson, p. 596.

> been a succourer of many, and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.[1]

The rest of this chapter goes on in the same vein, and several other of the epistles end with the same sort of compendium of personal greetings in which men and women believers are listed for affectionate praise without distinction. Lydia, the woman of business (selling purple) who became Paul's first convert in Europe, and opened her home to the other converts as the first church there,[2] may be mentioned as a person of substance and character who must have earned Paul's respect, as did also Lois and Eunice, whom Paul praises for their part in the early training of his young protegé, Timothy.[3]

Paul speaks of these women with geniune regard and deference, accepting them as individuals with a valuable contribution to make, regardless of their sex. Milton, on the other hand, is rarely able to separate a woman's character from her sex, and the sex is categorized in his mind as inferior. Only once, in an odd passage unlike anything else in his writing, does he mention the possibility that a woman might so exceed her husband in intelligence and ability that it would be acceptable common sense for her to take the lead in the partnership.[4] Eve and Dalila are embodiments of many of the traditional weaknesses ascribed to women, and Milton knows no other way to look at them but through the eyes of

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1 Romans 16:1--4.
2 Acts 16:14,15.
3 II Tim. 1:5
4 "Tetrachordon," Patterson, p. 653.

male superiority, the rightness and necessity of which he asserts over and over in a monotonous refrain throughout both Paradise Lost and Samson Agonistes.

This heavy-handed emphasis on the inferior status of women is not a true picture of the Pauline concept of women in spite of the fact that Milton drew much of his ammunition for his pronouncements from Paul's own words. It is quite true that Paul lays down the principle that the man is the head of the home, just as Christ is the head of the church, and that leadership in the church as well as the home belongs primarily to the male. These are reasonable assertions made in the interest of the orderly management of both home and church. But the interesting thing is the spirit in which they are made. Paul emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the marriage relationship; especially, in I Corinthians 7, he emphasizes the equal and mutual physical responsibilities, and, in Ephesians 5, the spiritual relationship:

> Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; ...So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it,....Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.[1]

[1] Ephesians 5:22-33.

Couched in these terms, the leadership of the husband seems reasonable and right, in contrast to the harsh assertiveness characteristic of Milton. It is clear that Paul envisions a deep concern of husband for wife, one so deep that her integrity as a person is a source of satisfaction to him and her well-being and happiness his first interest. Further, he sets up the Christian principle of self-sacrifice as the essence of the husband's relation to his wife as it is the essence of Christ's relation to the church. Milton, on the other hand, places the emphasis all the other way in the divorce tracts, and seems unwilling to concede any real integrity of personality, any individuality and independence of thought to the woman, but infers in many places that she was created and is intended for man's comfort and convenience. The element of loving self-sacrifice of the man for the woman is almost completely missing from these writings.

At times, it is true, a certain harshness of tone creeps into St. Paul's utterances (I Corinthians 14:34-35, I Tim. 2:9-15), but from the context it would seem that he is primarily addressing certain specific local situations. Rather than fall into the trap of explaining away uncomfortable Scriptures as Milton did, however, let us simply say that the difference between Paul and Milton on the subject of women is most of all one of emphasis. The emphasis in Paul is on love and mutual responsibility; in Milton, it is on man's superiority and a one-way obligation. It is interesting to observe that in handling the Scripture passages dealing with the headship of the man and the lesser place of the woman, Milton adheres strictly to the very letter of each injunction, in marked contrast to the method employed before in the passages limiting

divorce and male freedom, when he took tremendous liberties in interpreting the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

Just as the Bible was an extremely important part of the contemporary thought context in which Milton lived and wrote-- and formed his attitude toward women-- so also was the controversy over the status and character of women which claimed much popular attention all during the seventeenth century. One class of literary productions coming out of this discussion, the domestic handbooks, is worth investigating for the light they may throw upon Milton's attitude. They, too, are ostensibly derived from the same Biblical source as Milton's own divorce tracts. They were largely of Puritan genesis, a fact that would ensure Milton's acquaintance with them, and most were admitted,[14] recast by their preacher-authors from wedding sermons-- which, by the way, are still quite customary in many low Anglican churches, though unheard of in the United States.

The marriage or domestic handbook appeared in the early Renaissance and reached a peak of popularity with the rise to power and affluence of the Puritans. The home was supremely important to the Puritan citizen as the foundation for the accumulation and preservation of spiritual benefits, material possessions, and bodily comforts. To keep it in peace and good order was essential to every phase of his well-being. Since the wife set the tone of the home and was most directly responsible for its upkeep, everything depended upon her character. Thus, the domestic handbooks share with the controversial pamphlets an emphasis upon the feminine faults and virtues: extravagance, inconstancy, gossip, sharpness of tongue, idleness, lust, immodesty, and unruliness, as opposed

to frugality, loyalty, chastity, modesty, obedience, and zealous housewifery. But, in addition, they were careful to point out the responsibility of the husband in making the marriage a solid success; many advocated a single standard of morality for the two sexes, and at least one (Niccoles' A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving,1615) went so far as to mention an obligation of the husband to see that his wife had some suitable education. As a group, they were above all practical in tone, dealing with the most mundane and specific aspects of domestic life.

Some of the best known of the domestic handbooks are William Perkins' Christian Oeconomie (1609), William Gouge's Domesticall Duties (1620), and Matthew Griffith's Bethel: Or, A Forme For Families (1633). A more or less typical volume which may be taken for closer examination is William Whately's A Bride-Bush: Or, A Direction for Married Persons. Plainely Describing The Duties Common to both, and peculiar to each of them. By Performing Of Which, marriage shall proove a great helpe to such, as now for want of performing them, doe find it a little hell (1619). The book opens with several chapters discussing the reciprocal duties of husband and wife: faithfulness of each to the marriage partner; "due benevolence"-- the sexual obligation of each, to be exercised with temperance and reasonable accommodation; love, which makes the whole relationship worthwhile, and some of the means of attaining love as well as some of the pleasant effects of love; and finally, the duty of both toward their children. All of this is set forth with scrupulous care to consider the point of view of both husband and wife. One particularly interesting aspect of this part of Whately's work is his declaration that

sexual incompatibility is grounds for divorce; it is interesting, first because it was too advanced for his time, and caused objections that finally prompted recantation; and, second, because it contrasts so markedly with Milton's protestations that the physical relationship is only of minor importance, and that spiritual and intellectual incompatibility are the only valid grounds for divorce.

The next section has to do with the husband's duties in the successful marriage. To one familiar with Milton's writings, this begins to have a very familiar ring. The husband's duties, says Whately, are to govern his wife and to maintain her. He repeats the familiar Puritan maxim that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is of the church; both God and nature have assigned to man this role of head of the house, the man having been given the sterner visage. Therefore, "without question it is a sinne for a man to come lower, than God hath set him."[1] He protests, as Milton so often did, that domineering females are only the result of the husband's weakness and folly. The next several chapters are devoted to the means of maintaining authority by the husband: with justice, skill, and tact, with understanding that she is "subject to more natural imperfections than the man,"[2] with reasonable punishments (abridging liberty, withdrawing kindnesses, taking away pleasures) rather than blows. On this latter point, he becomes quite exercised at the wickedness of physical brutality, but in the end he concedes it may be necessary, in the last extremity, to use "a foole according to her folly, a child in understanding; [sic] like a child in years."[3]

1 William Whately, A Bride-Bush (London, 1623), p. 98.
2 Ibid., p. 131.
3 Ibid., pp. 107-108.

Whately is quite fair and generous on the subject of the husband's duty to maintain his wife and family. He recommends a man not marry at all if he have not the means to provide a decent living. If he marries, he says it is unjust to expect the wife to bear and rear the children, keep the home, earn a living, and make account of her gettings, too. "She must be made an equal partner of that which God hath given to both,"[1] says he, and she should not be forced to beg for her allowance. He is also very explicit about the husband's duty to provide for his wife and family by his will, in case of his death.

In the final section, which deals with the wife's particular duties, Whately really gets down to cases in terms that add up to the very essence of Milton's conception of the ideal woman. He launches out thus:

> The wives speciall dutie may fitly be referred to two heads: first, she must acknowledge her inferiorittie: secondly, she must carry her selfe as an inferior...First, then every good woman must suffer her selfe to be convinced in judgment, that she is not her husband's equal (yea, that her husband is her better by farre), without which it is not possible there should be any contentment, either in her heart, or in her house.[2]

She must say to herself:

> I will not strive against God and nature: though my sinne have made my place tedious, yet will I confesse and hold the truth: Mine husband is my superior, my better. Unlesse the wife learne this lesson perfectly, if she have it not without booke, and at her very fingers ends (as wee speake), if her very heart doe not inwardly and thorowly condescend unto it, there will be nothing betwixt them but wrangling, repining, striving, and a continual vying to be equal with him; or above him...[3]

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[1] Whately, p. 182.
[2] Ibid., p. 189
[3] Ibid., p. 190.

To anticipated objections, Whately answers that just as a servant is inferior, no matter what his gifts, so must the wife keep her place; it is better to be stupid than presumptuous. He then continues:

> Though he be of meaner birth, and of lesser wit, though he were of no wealth, nor account in the world, before thou didst marry him: yet after the tying of this knot, God will have thee subject, and thou must put upon thyself so to bee. If thou demandest, what reason is there for that? I answer there is no reason in that person, that cannot see reason to stand to God's appointment, in the ordering of higher and lower places....It is fit it should be so, because the Lord hath so appointed.[1]

Furthermore, the woman must not only convince herself that she is inferior, but also she must carry herself so as to demonstrate it in every way. She must look to her husband "as God's deputie, not looking to his person, but to his place."[2] She must always use respectful language to him, avoiding familiar nicknames as presumptuous. Whately summarizes the Puritan position in words that recall Milton in nearly every line:

> Male sex is preferred before the female in degree of place, and in dignities, as all will yield that consider the words of Scripture in that behalfe; for the woman was made for man, and not man for the woman. He is the image and glory of God, she his image and glory; and nature hath given her her haire for a covering, as a naturall badge of this her inferiorities to the man, whom God also made in the first place, that he might thereby make knowne his mind of giving that sex first place.[3]

After many admonitions to patience under reproof and subjection to obedience, Whately has the grace momentarily to try to face up to what all this may mean to a woman:

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1 Whately, p. 192.
2 Ibid., p. 193.
3 Ibid., p. 201; compare the lines quoted from Paradise Lost on p. 49.

> And now you have heard the first part of subjection, obedience; a duty which (I doubt not) seemeth hard enough to womankind: for it is a yoake laid upon them in their creation, which also since their fall, hath been made cumbersome, and so they are ever loath to bear it. [1]

He ends the book with some very somber advice concerning the wife's duty to suffer patiently, whether affliction is deserved or not, and not to leave her husband, even if her life is in danger, except temporarily and with intention to return. A woman coupled with a brutal partner can only learn to live with the knowledge that she should have been warier in her choice, and that not to marry at all would have been better.

After this rather startling picture of the Puritan ideal of domestic behavior, it may be useful to explore the actual status of women in relation to home and business during Milton's lifetime. One should keep in mind the complexity of the factors at work, some of them temporarily tending to be detrimental to the status of women, though in the long run they resulted in the betterment of her situation.

Lewis Mumford, in his facinating book, The Culture of Cities,[2] describes vividly the revolution in living and working habits which took place in the seventeenth century. This period saw a gradual divorce of the home, and hence the wife, from the workplace. Production, selling, and consumption, the three basic economic functions, had before all taken place in one location. Now these functions began to separate, with the rise of capitalism and the movement of large numbers of people into the cities, and the home became a place exclusively for consumption. The

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[1] Whately, p. 209.
[2] (New York, 1920).

wife lost contact with the affairs of the world and became a drudge or courtesan or both. A new kind of housework became her responsibility, with the change from the simple equipment of the medieval home, to elaborate furniture in which ornament outstripped function and took much more tedious care. The house also changed, with more rooms, each with a more specialized function, and more floors to the building, with fires to be tended and water to be carried at several levels. The labor of the housewife became simultaneously more lonely and onerous, and less challenging than it had been.

Alice Clark's The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century[1] is even more informative about the revolution that was taking place: she demonstrates that the energy and hardiness of the Elizabethan woman was giving way to the idleness and dissipation of many women in the Restoration. She points out also that capitalism was destroying both domestic and family industry by the end of the seventeenth century, reducing women to the status of unpaid domestic servants, completely dependent upon their husbands. This had not at all been the case during the early part of the century, for wives largely earned their own keep, hiring unmarried girls to do domestic chores and freeing themselves to help with the family business. "In the seventeenth century the idea is seldom encountered that a man supports his wife; husband and wife were then mutually dependent and together supported their children."[2] Miss Clark has this comment on the effect of sharing both domestic and business responsibilities between husband and wife:

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1 (New York, 1920)

2 Alice Clark, The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1920), p. 12.

> The effect on social relations was also marked, for their work implied an association of men and women through a wide range of human interests. ... The relation between husband and wife which obtained most usually among the upper classes in England at the opening of the seventeenth century, appears indeed to have been that of partnership; the chief responsibility for the care of the children and the management and provisioning of the household resting on the wife's shoulders, while in business matters she was her husband's lieutenant. The wife was subject to her husband, her life was generally an arduous one, but she was by no means regarded as a servant. A comradeship existed between them which was stimulating and inspiring to both. The ladies of the Elizabethan period possessed courage, initiative, resourcefulness, and wit in a high degree. [1]

Compare this characterization with that of Eve; it is difficult to imagine Eve behaving with the good sense, vigor, and resourcefulness of the Elizabethan woman.

Not only were the women of Milton's early life effective helpers in their husband's businesses, but they also very often, as the necessity arose, took over entirely. The names of women appear over and over in seventeenth century correspondence and business records as managers of the husband's affairs on his absence, disability, or death; they appear on petitions to Court for wardships, monopolies, patents, and grants of licenses as sellers of silk, assayers of gold or silver wire, proprietors of salt-works, pawn-brokers and money-lenders, shipping agents, shippers of old shoes, wine cask staves, wheat, gunpowder, and on the lists of suppliers to the Army and Navy. Of the twenty-one master printers of

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[1] Alice Clark, The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (New York, 1920) pp. 40-41.

London in 1630, three were women. A certain Dorothy Petty was extremely successful as an insurance agent in London, and one Joan Dant rose from the poverty of street peddling to a worth of £9000 at her death. Most of these women owed their initial opportunity to the fact that under the gild system, a widow inherited her husband's membership, apprentices, and the good will accrueing to his business at his death.

As the century wore on, the gilds weakened, capitalism grew, and the changes noted before became more and more obvious. Miss Clark describes some of the deleterious effects on the status of women: "Undoubtedly the removal of business and public interests from the home, resulted in a loss of educational opportunities for girls; a loss which was not made good to them in other ways, and therefore produced generations of women endowed with a lower mental and moral calibre."[1] Lack of training and education led to feelings of inferiority on the part of women, and this encouraged their willing subjection to men. The wife of the diarist Pepys is a good example of a woman whose husband moved in high circles of society and government, but who was silly, house-bound, clothes-crazy, and immature in the extreme, and was treated by husband (himself little better, it is true) like a wayward child.

At any time of dislocation and drastic change in the fundamental mores of a people, strife and controversy are engendered. Perhaps it is significant for the cause of women's rights in the long run that there was so much discussion about the status of women at this time, for though the the trend of events was to be temporarily harmful to their best interests

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[1] Clark, p. 306.

and much of the opinion expressed was also unhelpful, still, for the first time, there were serious attempts in writing to advance the dignity and worth of the sex.

The argument over woman was already under way in the late sixteenth century, with the greatest of all English monarchs, a woman, still on the throne, and women at their most vigorous and independent in the business world. By the turn of the century there had already appeared numerous popular attacks, satires, and defenses in one form or another. The very assurance and freedom of women at that era probably helped bring about the reaction that came with the reign of James I, as well as James' own misogyny, the repercussions of the Overbury affair, and the rising influence of the Puritans. A certain Barnabe Rich took advantage of the tide of animosity to bring out a work called Faultes, Faultes, And nothing else but faultes in 1606, and and then expanded and reissued it in 1616 as My Ladies Looking Glasse. Wherein May be Discerned A Wise Man From a Foole, A Good Woman From A Bad. In this book he belabours improper dress, low morals, and hypocrisy in women. These and other diatribes provoked replies, some in verse, as, for example, An Apologie For Woman-Kinde,(1605), by one I. G., and some in prose, as Lodowick Lloyd's The Choice of Jewels (1607), the latter defending women by example from great women of history. William Heale, in 1609, with his An Apologie for Women, attempted to defend women against attacks on their dignity and virtue, and advocated some protection against abuse by husbands.

The controversy was aroused to new heat in 1615 with the publication of Joseph Swetnam's enormously popular The Araignment of Lewd, Froward, and unconstant women: Or the vanitie of them, choose you whether. With a

commendation of wise, vertuous and honest women. Pleasant for married Men, profitable for young Men, and hurtful to none. (1615). This was a biting castigation of the traditional sins of women, especially those which the rising Puritan group took very seriously: extravagance, vanity, pride, and idleness. The effect of Swetnam's work was so great as to set off a whole new phase of controversy, and one of the most interesting of the outcomes was that several women appeared among those aroused by his accusations to defend their sex. Rachel Speght, Esther Sowernam, Ioane Sharpe, Constantia Munda: these are the names or pseudonyms of some of the women who for the first time wrote in rebuttal against the age-old accusations common to Swetnam and many others.

By 1620, King James himself added his weight to the argument by bringing pressure through the Bishop of London on the clergy to exhort their flocks most strongly against the frivolities and excesses of women. Close on the heels of his action, the bookseller John Trundle issued a pamphlet called Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman: being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times. This work, according to Wright, "reads like a journalistic expansion of King James's objections to feminine styles."[1] Much more important was the rebuttal to this work by an unnamed author, issued a few days later: Haec-Vir: Or the Womanish-Man: Being an Answere to a late Booke intituled Hic-Mulier. The author pleads for woman's right to freedom of will; he denies that she is addicted to novelty for its own sake, but rather insists that reasonable change is

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[1] Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England (Chapel Hill, 1935), p. 494.

wholesome and necessary, while enslavement to outworn custom is foolish. The favorite Renaissance theme of mutability is thus made an argument for the defense of women. Louis B. Wright has the following comments on the importance of this work:

> Haec-Vir, the answer, is a vigorous dialogue at times eloquent in the sincere defense of women's right to personal freedom. A treatise reflecting the opinion of the more advanced social thinkers among the bourgeoisie, it is a document whose significance has been overlooked....Written with far more dignity and spirit than the usual controversial pamphlet, Haec-Vir is the Areopagitica of London woman, who had attained greater freedom than any of her predecessors or than any of her European contemporaries.[1]

Ballads, broadsides, allusions in other popular works, as well as further serious prose, carried the controversy into the third and fourth decades of the century. By 1637, in a work called Haec Homo, a certain William Austin was so bold as to contend that women were essentially the same as men in intellect and spirit, the only real difference being in body. Around 1640, the criticisms of women were degenerating in tone and descending to vulgar humor. Nevertheless, another serious defense of women appeared signed with a feminine pseudonym. The tremendously long title may be shortened to The womens sharpe revenge (1640), and it appealed for a single standard of morality, education for women, and a new concept of them as something more than the servants of men.

During the Commonwealth itself, Puritan fanaticism and ingrained distrust of women came to the fore in an outburst of what Wright calls

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[1] Wright, pp. 495, 497.

"coarse invective and ribald satire."[1] Wright makes the point, however, that the more shrill these complaints grew, the less they were in fact representative of the average citizen's view:

> Under stress of prejudice and fanaticism in the Puritan conflict, the medieval distrust of all things giving pleasure found expression. It was but natural that woman should find herself included among the things proscribed...Because Puritan zealots of the mid-seventeenth century abused women, it is fallacious to assume that the attitude of the rank and file of the middle class was one of opposition to woman's social progress; the same Puritans objected to the theater, music, and all forms of amusements; yet certainly they did not represent the composite opinion of the class which at the moment, they were the most voluble part.[2]

Wright's comments would indicate that a much more reasonable attitude was the norm.

Thus through the formative and creative years of Milton's life, a solid undercurrent of real advancement of the rights of women was growing. The many savage attacks on women prompted some eloquent defenses which embodied a new concept of women and indicated a slow but steady growth in the estimation of their capabilities. In the second half of the century, a new coterie of gifted and articulate women, including Aphra Behn, Lucy Hutchinson, and Margaret Cavendish appeared in England. Moreover, the defenses of women, especially their right to education as the key to maturity of mind, were attaining a stature that demanded to be taken seriously and were also reaching a wider reading public.

The work of the brilliantly gifted German woman, Anna Maria von Schurman, entitled A Learned Maid, or Whether a Christian Maid may

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[1] Wright, p. 506.
[2] Ibid., p. 506-509.

be a Scholar (1659-London), was a plea for the education of women and a refutation of the traditional objections to such education. She insisted that women have the positive duty to give themselves to learning if their circumstances allow, but that the home is still their foremost responsibility.[1] Mrs. Bathsua Makin, who taught the daughters of Charles I, was another eloquent protagonist of female education. Her Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen appeared in 1673, the year before Milton's death. In this work she advocated an extremely broad scope of learning for women, including ancient and modern languages, mathematics, science-- "the whole Encyclopedia of Learning."[2]

By the end of the century the changing view of woman indicated by these scattered defences was having even more explicit expression. True, this was after Milton's time, but the evidence for a long-term permanent trend is clear. The rights of women to domestic justice as well as to education were persuasively presented by the devout and intelligent Mary Astell in her Reflections on Marriage(1700) and her A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their true and greatest interest (1694). In the latter she argues that women's minds are capable of academic accomplishment, and she scorns those women who cultivate ignorant humility rather than sober and godly intelligence. Finally, Daniel Defoe, in the essay "An Academy for Women" in An Essay upon Projects(1697), took up the cudgels for the education of women, calling it a barbarous custom to leave them ignorant and then reproach them for their folly. He advocated an educational institution for young women similar to the usual public school for boys, with stress on secular as well as religious training.

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1 Jean Gagen, The New Woman (New York, 1954), p. 42
2 Ibid., p. 42

Of course, it was many years before these appeals were heeded, but the injustice of the situation was being aired, and the march of women's rights was under way, however slowly and falteringly.

III.

Evidences from the Works

Milton lived and worked at the midpoint of this century of intellectual turmoil. He must certainly have been aware of the feministic controversy, as it was a part of the inescapable milieu of his life work. He could not know what future years were to bring in this area; and yet we may justly point out that while he was far ahead of his time in his conception of many other rights of mankind, he was behind the most liberal thought of his age in his conception of women. He spoke in trumpet tones that are still ringing, advocating free thought, a free press, freedom from traditional ideas in government and education. In view of his liberality in these areas, one would expect a similar liberality in his conception of woman's role.

What one actually finds is a rather strange ambivalence of attitudes for one so thoroughly and clearly articulate in the expression of the "modern" point of view in other human affairs. The evidence is that his wonted liberality was frustrated and confused by the disappointment and dismay of his personal marital misadventure. Liberal, indeed he was, in some ways, but always with severe limitations. It is much nearer the truth to call him a conservative in this area, one who, at his best, reflects the finest of traditional thought. He saw woman as a creature subordinate and inferior by nature, intended for the comfort and convenience of man, but in his view she is elevated and ennobled by this very role of service for and close contact

with the male. He also believed he was portraying the Biblical concept of woman, but, in truth, as has been discussed before he, like others before him, had wrenched and distorted it by over-emphasis on the wife's duty to her husband, and minimization of the husband's duty to his wife. We find, in sum, a highly complex attitude displayed in Milton's major works: on the one hand, he assigns woman a relatively high and dignified position; on the other, he betrays hostility toward her and fear of her power to destroy.

The ambivalence of Milton's outlook can be shown in the divorce tracts perhaps most clearly, for here he is able to express himself directly, unhampered by the exigencies of the dramatic situation which are unavoidable restrictions on the expression of his personal views in the other works. Here Milton undeniably shows a great amount of honor and esteem for women in his picture of the ideal marriage relationship. He often uses such expressions as "the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman," [1] "the cheerful society of wedlock," [2] "a meet and happy conversation." [3] He speaks of marriage as a "remedy of loneliness, which if it bring not a sociable mind as well as a conjunctive body, leaves us no less alone than before," [4] or, in another place, as the means of "prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man." [5] One would think that the wife in such a marriage as he envisions would

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[1] "Doctrine and Discipline," Patterson, p. 578.
[2] Ibid., p. 583.
[3] Ibid., p. 581.
[4] "Tetrachordon," Patterson, p. 657.
[5] "Doctrine and Discipline," Patterson, p. 581.

necessarily have a cultivated intelligence and great spiritual and artistic sensitivity to take her part in the communion of souls Milton seems to be describing. A further search of the divorce tracts reveals, however, a notable lack of the idea of any true communion in the sense of interchange of ideas, but rather a one-sided view of the wife as a means of refreshment and restoration of the husband. To paraphrase Saurat, the role of woman in man's intellectual life is that of "recreation" in the literal sense, to provide communion with another who can give rest, comfort, strength, and can offer acceptance and even improvement of his ideas, not conflict and opposition, nor mere passive reception.[1]

This thought is expressed, for example, in an interesting passage in Tetrachordon which deals with the argument of "Austin" that "manly friendship... had been a more becoming solace for Adam." Milton rejects this idea with the conclusion that this is a "crabbed opinion... that there is a peculiar comfort in the married state besides the genial bed, which no other society affords." Then he goes on to say:

> No mortal nature can endure, either in the actions of religion, or study of wisdom, without sometimes slackening the cords of intense thought and labor, which, lest we should think faulty, God himself conceals us not his own recreations before the world was built: "I was," saith the Eternal Wisdom, "daily his delight, playing always before him." And to him, indeed, wisdom is as a high tower of pleasure, but to us a steep hill, and we toiling ever about the bottom. He executes with ease the exploits of his omnipotence, as easy as with us it is to will; but no worthy enterprise can be done by us without continual plodding and wearisomeness to our faint and sensitive abilities. We cannot, therefore, always be contemplative, or pragmatical abroad, but have need of some delightful intermissions, whereby the enlarged soul may leave off a while her severe schooling,

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[1] Denis Saurat, Milton: Man and Thinker (New York, 1925), p. 167.

> and, like a glad youth in wandering vacancy, may keep her holidays to joy and harmless pastime; which as she cannot well do without company, so in no company so well as where the different sex in most resembling unlikeness, and most unlike resemblance, cannot but please best, and be pleased in the aptitude of that variety.[1]

It can be seen from this passage and other similar ones that intellectual reciprocity is not what Milton has in mind. In fact, he is specifically saying that the man would descend from his exalted intellectual pursuits to enjoy the light and pleasant company of the woman. One searches the divorce tracts in vain for a passage which develops at any length the thought of actual interchange of ideas between marriage partners; rather, harmony, congeniality, love, and appreciation of the man by the woman appear to be the extent of Milton's concept of communion of mind.

It is not surprising to find, therefore, that nowhere in the divorce pamphlets or in any other writings does Milton advocate education for women.[2] How is a woman to participate meaningfully in even a limited intellectual relationship with a cultivated man if she has had no training or preparation for this privilege? Milton was in no sense a part of the awakening movement for female education. This failure cannot be attributed to lack of occasion to think the problem out and present it, for the ideal medium would have been his otherwise enlightened, though unrealistic, tract On Education.

Yet throughout the divorce tracts Milton is emphatic that the non-physical relationships in marriage are vastly more important than the

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[1] Patterson, pp. 656-657.
[2] One recalls his alleged remark concerning his daughters: "One tongue is enough for a woman."

physical, and that it is a degradation to attempt physical union without union also on the non-physical plane:

> For although God in the first ordaining of marriage taught us to what end he did it, in words expressly implying the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation til afterwards, as being but a secondary end in dignity....[1]

And again:

> And having shown that disproportion, contrariety or numbness of mind may justly be divorced, by proving already that the prohibition thereof opposes the express end of God's institution, suffers not marriage to satisfy that intellectual and innocent desire which God himself kindles in man to be the bond of wedlock, but only to remedy a sublunary and bestial burning.[2]

Thus, while Milton was adamant in his conviction that woman was made for man, that she is ordinarily meant to be his inferior and subordinate, still she was also to share, in some degree at least, his intellectual and spiritual life.

The divorce tracts also embody another facet of Milton's attitude toward women, his susceptibility and immature judgment concerning them, the very basis of the problem which precipitated these works. One is wearied in them with the repetition of the idea that "some conscionable and tender pity might be had of those who have unwarily, in a thing they never practised before, made themselves the bondmen of a luckless and helpless matrimony."[3] The following passage from the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce is typical in its nearly unmistakable tone of injured innocence and rueful shock:

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1 "Doctrine and Discipline," Patterson, p. 578.
2 Ibid., p. 591.
3 Ibid., p. 579.

> But some are ready to object, that the disposition ought seriously to be considered before. But let them know again, that for all the wariness can be used, it may yet befall a discreet man to be mistaken in his choice: and we have plenty of examples. The soberest and best governed men are least practised in these affairs, and who knows not that the bashful muteness of a virgin may ofttimes hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for conversation? Nor is there that freedom of access granted or presumed, as may suffice to a perfect discerning till too late; and where any indisposition is suspected, what more usual than the persuasion of friends, that acquaintance, as it increases, will amend all? And lastly, it is not strange though many, who have spent their youth chastely, are in some things not so quick-sighted.[1]

Though Milton's scrupulous care in refusing to cite his own case in so many words and in maintaining a facade of impartiality has struck some as downright amusing, passages such as this take very little reading between the lines to be seen as confessions of bad judgment and infatuation with superficial attributes. This transparently personal tone makes it irresistible to nearly all Milton scholars to connect the divorce tracts with the great catastrophe in his personal life, his marriage to Mary Powell.

The great Milton expert E.M.W. Tillyard has some very illuminating comments on the turning point of Milton's attitude. After citing some of the passages in the divorce tracts in which Milton mentions a daily grating on the nerves with thinly veiled asperity, Tillyard mentions Saurat's conclusion that the trouble arose from Mary Powell's refusal to consummate the marriage. Saurat thinks this is the pivotal point of difficulty, but Tillyard does not agree. Nevertheless, the disaster that the marriage turned out to be shook Milton's self-esteem very

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[1] Patterson, p. 583.

seriously for the first time. Tillyard points out that two strong motives in Milton were in conflict: first, his sensuality, and second, his pride. Tillyard thinks the latter received the more damaging blow. He concludes this discussion with the very acute observation that Milton was not the kind of person who could easily and cheerfully admit a fault.[1] Indeed, nothing is more evident to the thoughtful reader of Milton than the unrelieved seriousness with which he regarded himself and his work. Saurat in another place does agree that Milton's egoism is "complete and absolutely dominant,"[2] showing how the divorce tracts, Areopagitica, Of Education, and the attacks on the prelates and the narrow Presbyterians were all provoked by personal motives, many of the works being openly retaliatory in tone.

The divorce tracts are written practically exclusively from the abused husband's point of view. The following passage from the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce is explicit on this point:

> But yet to say, divorce was granted for relief of wives rather than husbands, is weakly conjectured, and is manifestly the extreme shift of a huddled exposition.... Palpably uxorious! who can be ignorant, that woman was created for man, and not man for woman, and that a husband may be injured as insufferably in marriage as a wife? What an injury it is after wedlock not to be beloved! what to be slighted! what to be contended with in point of house-rule who shall be the head; not for any parity of wisdom, for that were something reasonable, but out of female pride! ... is it not most likely that God in his law had more pity toward the man thus wedlocked, than towards the woman that was created for another?[3]

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1 E.M.W. Tillyard, Milton (London, 1946), p. 140.
2 Saurat, p. 78.
3 Patterson, pp. 612-613.

As we have seen, the tracts are also full of self-righteous protestations of innocence:

> If he be such as hath spent his youth unblamably, and laid up his chiefest earthly comforts in the enjoyment of a contented marriage, nor did neglect that furtherance which was to be obtained therein by constant prayers; when he shall find himself bound fast to as uncomplying discord of nature, or, as it oft happens, to an image of earth and phlegm, with whom he looked to be a copartner of a sweet and gladsome society, and sees withal that his bondage is now inevitable; though he be almost the strongest Christian, he will be ready to despair in virtue, and mutiny against Divine Providence.[1]

Such phrases as "an uncomplying discord of nature," "an image of earth and phlegm," and, in another place, "a mute and spiritless mate," undeniably reveal considerable personal rancor. These two ideas, the pitiable state of the husband in an uncongenial marriage and the unfairness of such harsh affliction to a completely virtuous man, are repeated over and over until the reader is weary of them. The effect of this repetition and the increasingly querulous and abusive tone chronologically through the tracts is to bring to mind the thought, he "doth protest too much," and the suspicion that perhaps Milton was uncomfortably aware somewhere in his inmost being that part of the fault in his unlucky marriage had been his, after all.

There is no doubt, of course, that Milton was conscious of the enchantment of feminine loveliness and aware of that part of his nature which responded warmly to "female charm," but he was also suspicious and afraid of it. This fear of the power of feminine attraction to lure the

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[1] Patterson, p. 585.

male into sin can be demonstrated indirectly in Milton's lifelong emphasis on the virtue of chastity and the nature of his attacks on his enemies.

That Milton had a preoccupation with the concept of chastity is very evident. To digress beyond the divorce tracts for the moment, we have already seen his youthful dedication to this ideal in the Latin elegies and the passage from "Lycidas" cited before, and in the quotations from the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. These are anything but isolated examples of the tendency to continual self-justification shown in the divorce writings, and in other parts of his prose as well. Any of a number of passages from the Second Defence might be cited to support this, and especially the following from An Apology for Smectymnuus:

> I betook me among those lofty fables and romances, which recount in solemn cantoes the deeds of knighthood founded by our victorious kings.... So that even these books, which to many others have been the fuel of wantonness and loose living, I cannot think how, unless by divine indulgence, proved to me so many incitements, as you have heard, to the love and steadfast observation of that virtue which abhors the society of bordelloes.[1]

The theme of virtue being itself a source of superhuman power and a sufficient defense against all evil is the basis of Comus. Arthur Sewell, in his book on Milton's theology, makes some interesting observations on this subject:

> In Comus the too brusque opposition of Chastity and Sexual Indulgence comes from a mind hampered by fear of the flesh, made austere by an escape into 'restrictive virtue.' When Milton puts into the mouth of Comus his lavish justification of goodly enjoyments, he writes with enthusiasm-- as though he would release a pressure on his spirit.[2]

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[1] Patterson, p. 549.

[2] Arthur Sewell, A Study in Milton's Christian Doctrine (London, 1939), p. 75.

A more realistic view of the incorruptible power of virtue appears in Paradise Lost, but the great emphasis on purity, especially the purity of the marriage relationship, is still there. Sonnets IX and X, both addressed to women, are not love sonnets, but tributes to their virtue. Of course, the whole idea of chastity is inextricably bound up with that of temperance and the sovereignty of reason over passion which are all part of the very core of Milton's credo. Nevertheless, the preoccupation with chastity itself is so great that we may perhaps be justified in suspecting that its achievement and preservation in his personal life cost not a little struggle and discipline. Virtue is held up as a dear-bought fruit of victory.

Another aspect of the same preoccupation, a less attractive one, is to be found in the kind of attack Milton was wont to loose against his enemies when really provoked. Sewell is again pertinent when he asks: "Why does Milton accuse his enemies of gross sensuality?... Why does he jeer at them for their effeminacy, their submission to the rule of their wives, their amorous escapades? Why does he dwell on petticoats and serving maids?"[1] No doubt the prime passage in question is that in the Second Defence treating of the seduction of Salmasius' servant[2] in terms that sound more like Swift at his vilest than the poet of "L'Allegro" and "Lycidas." There is a similar passage in An Apology for Smectymnuus.[3] Perhaps it is not too much an indulgence in amateur psycho-analysis to infer that Milton's own susceptibility to feminine attractions made him unusually quick to see the failings of others in this respect.

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[1] Sewell, p. 75.
[2] Patterson, p. 1144.
[3] Ibid., p. 550-551.

Eve, in Paradise Lost, and Dalila, in Samson Agonistes, the two greatest female characters portrayed in Milton's works, embody with great consistency the ambivalence and complexity of Milton's attitude toward women as revealed in the divorce tracts: high regard and respect on the one side, and hostility and fear on the other. Eve fulfills what Milton conceives as the ideal role of woman. She is made exactly according to Adam's desire (VIII, 451). Adam's first and most heart-felt requirement is a remedy for his loneliness: "In solitude/ What happiness, who can enjoy alone,/ Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (VIII, 365-366). As in the divorce tracts, the need of a sexual partner to be the mother of mankind is decidedly secondary in Adam's line of argument, and is only briefly mentioned in his long conversation with God (VIII, 415-425).

Eve steps into a role ready-made for her, exalted and dignified, worthy of all praise and honor, but one clearly defined as secondary:

> Not equal, as their sex not equal seemd;
> For contemplation hee and valour formd,
> For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
> Hee for God only, shee for God in him:
> His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd
> Absolute rule:...
>
> Her unadorned golden tresses wore
> Dissheveld, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
> As the Vine curles her tendrils, which impli'd
> Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
> And by her yeilded, by him best receivd.
> Yeilded with coy submission, modest pride,
> And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (IV, 296-311)

Although Adam insists that he values her companionship more than the "genial bed," his first action on meeting her is to march her off to the nuptial bower. Milton allows Eve some advantage over Adam in her greater delicacy of perception and in her quicker intuition; for example, Eve

swiftly and completely confesses her guilt when God confronts the pair after their sin, but Adam's pride and rationality make him equivocate at first. But Eve's actual intellectual relationship with Adam, before the Fall, at least, seems quite deficient. Her intellect is clearly inferior, but this very inferiority to Milton is part of her perfection. She is seldom allowed an original thought of her own other than some occasional questions, and when the first fairly important original thought comes along, it proves to be a total disaster. Otherwise her role is to act as a sounding board for Adam, to encourage him to expound his superior wisdom and knowledge. In Milton's hands Eve accepts her role gladly ("O thou for whom/ And from whom I was formd flesh of thy flesh,/ And without whom am to no end, my Guide and Head," IV, 440-444). She even goes out of her way to assume it, as when she avoids listening to the angel's discourse in order to hear it from Adam instead. As Saurat says, "Eve accepts her inferiority, not as a degradation, but as a privilege the more, since thus she has more to receive, more to admire, more to possess--a typically feminine solution to the whole problem."[1] This quotation shows, alas, that Milton was not alone in his stereotyped view of woman.

Adam's flowery salutations to Eve are another evidence of the high regard he had for her: "My fairest, my espous'd, my latest found,/ Heav'ns last best gift, my ever new delight... Best image of myself and dearer half" (V, 18-19, 95). C. S. Lewis expresses beautifully the high place accorded to Eve in Paradise Lost, having just described the stateliness of the personages of both Adam and Eve:

> This royalty is less apparent in Eve, partly because she is in fact Adam's inferior, in her double capacity of wife and subject, but partly,

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[1] Saurat, p. 161.

> I believe, because her humility is often misunderstood. She thinks herself more fortunate than he, because she has him for her companion while he "like consort to himself can nowhere find" (IV, 448) and obeys his commands "unargued" (IV, 635). This is humility, and, in Milton's view, becoming humility. But do not forget it is to Adam she speaks; a lover to a lover, a wife to a husband, the Queen of earth to the King.... There is that in Eve which compels deference.... The angel hails her more ceremoniously than Adam. She stands before him unabashed-- a great lady doing the honors of her own house, the matriarch of the world. [1]

Another very real element of Eve's dignity lies in the fact that she does participate with Adam in worship of their Creator (V, 145-210), thus carrying out more fully in the spiritual realm than in the intellectual the ideals of companionship set forth in the divorce tracts.

Adam, in Paradise Lost, shows just the kind of naive susceptibility to the charms of Eve (which certainly were considerable) that Milton had seemed to betray in the divorce tracts. [2] The description of Eve as Satan first saw her, with her "wanton ringlets" of golden hair, recalls a Botticelli nymph (IV, 306), and her beauty is emphasized in many lyrical passages throughout the work. She is seen by Satan in sensuous terms that recall the tone of passages in Comus (IV, 304-318, 491-502); she is seen by angels as awesomely lovely in her role as Mother of Mankind (V, 385-391); and she is seen by Adam as the perfection of submissive beauty and grace (IV, 305-310, 498). But always, whether in the sunshine of innocence or the shadow of guilt, she is beautiful, and alluring to Adam-- and to Milton. Of course, it was this very captivation with Eve's beauty which was Adam's undoing. There are portents of tragedy to come

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[1] C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (London, 1942), pp. 120-121.
[2] Various other early writings seem to show this susceptibility also. See, for example, Latin elegies I and VII, and the Italian poems to Emilia and Leonora.

in his speech to the angel about Eve's creation, their early relationship, and the effect that she has on him:

> Here passion first I felt,
> Commotion strange, in all enjoyments else
> Superiour and unmov'd, here onely weake
> Against the charm of Beauties powerful glance.
> Or Nature faild in mee, and left some part
> Not proof enough such Object to sustain,
> Or from my side subducting, took perhaps
> More than enough: at least on her bestow'd
> Too much of Ornament, in outward shew
> Elaborate, of inward less exact.
> For well I understand in the prime end
> Of Nature her th'inferiour, in the mind
> And inward Faculties, which most excell,
> His Image who made both, and less expressing
> The character of that Dominion giv'n
> O're other creatures; yet when I approach
> Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
> And in herself compleat, so well to know
> Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
> Seems wisest, vertuousest, discreetest, best;
> All higher knowledge in her presence falls
> Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her
> Looses discountnanc't, and like folly shewes;
> Authoritie and Reason on her waite,
> As one intended first, not after made
> Occasionally; and to consummate all,
> Greatness of mind and nobleness thir seat
> Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
> About her, as a guard Angelic plac't. (VIII, 530-559)

Was Milton seeing himself in this confession of infatuation? An answer can only be conjecture, but at least the possibility is there.

Basil Willey puts his finger on Milton's perhaps unconscious mental processes as he constructed the motivational framework for the Fall:

> He enlarges the significance of Adam's disobedience by making it a capital instance of surrender to "female charm"; and in this manner he is able not only to harmonize the historical fall with the psychological fall, but also to vent much of his personal resentment against womankind.[1]

[1] Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background (Middlesex, England, 1962), p. 236.

Adam truly loves Eve in his own way, there is no doubt, and when the chips are down, he cannot bear to think of life without her; he eats of the forbidden fruit "Against his better knowledge, not deceav'd,/ But fondly overcome with female charm" (IX, 998-999). Eve's sin is pride, arising partly from a sense of injury induced by the serpent and partly from vanity inflated by the serpent's flattery; but Adam's sin is uxoriousness, and the willing subjection of his reason to passion (which amounted to the same thing in Milton's eyes):

> Some cursed fraud
> Of enemie hath beguil'd thee, yet unknown,
> And mee with thee hath ruined, for with thee
> Certain my resolution is to Die;
> How can I live without thee, how foregoe
> The sweet Converse and Love so dearly joyn'd,
> To live again in these wilde woods forlorn?
> Should God create another Eve, and I
> Another rib afford, yet loss of thee
> Would never from my heart; no, no, I feel
> The Link of Nature draw me, Flesh of my Flesh
> Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State
> Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.
> (IX, 904-916)

Strong indication that Milton did actually dislike women is to be found in his specific characterization of Eve. She is marvellously beautiful, it is true, endowed with supreme grace in outward form and manner, and full of a clinging kind of feminine charm. Yet Eve's basic character and the workings of her mind are drawn by Milton with all the traditional weaknesses and failings of womankind subtly but devastatingly emphasized. She clearly is always in need of Adam's guidance, for her own judgment is limited by a certain heedlessness, and inability or unwillingness to see the possible ramifications of a situation. In this picture of the ideal woman, Eve before the Fall, Milton gives her an "intellect," and "ear capable of what was high," but he does not really want her to worry her

pretty little head with anything serious, beyond asking Adam a question now and then, so that he can enjoy giving her the benefit of his superior knowledge.

But more specifically, Milton's most telling indictments of the nature of woman through Eve come in three passages: in Eve's first step toward the Fall, that is, her argument with Adam to let her work alone; in her reasonings during the temptation; and in the Fall itself. His emphasis on "feminine" weaknesses in these passages constitutes a judgment of woman's moral and intellectual capacities.

In the first of these passages, Book IX, lines 205-385, Eve wheedles Adam for permission to work on her own for a while at her gardening tasks, unhindered by distracting dalliance; here she displays incomplete understanding of the seriousness of the angel's warning, stubbornness and unreasonableness in the face of Adam's lack of confidence in her, unjustified overconfidence and headstrong self-assurance, wilful misuse and bad timing of an otherwise sound argument for freedom, insistence on the last word, and outrageous assumption of Adam's full permission when any concession at all was wrung from him much against his better judgment. What a clever display of much that is popularly considered most maddening, trivial, and unworthy in womankind!

And why was Adam so reluctant to consent? Hanford believes it was because "His secret thought is that she is unworthy of the enjoyment of that moral freedom which is the portion of the mature human being."[1] Of course, it may be said in Adam's defense that he had been warned to expect

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[1] Hanford, p. 191

trouble and was only being cautious, but the truth is that Eve, as she is portrayed in this work is not mature enough really to be trusted to exercise good judgment in the face of unusual circumstances.

In the temptation scene, Boox IX, 531-780, Eve exhibits vanity, susceptibility to flattery, credulity, dissatisfaction with her allotted place and ingratitude for God's gracious provision for her, curiosity, mental confusion, unoriginality of reasoning (mere repetition of Satan's arguments), and resentment because of her inferiority.

Then, in the events leading up to Adam's fall, Eve reveals some of the more serious "feminine" failings (Book XI, 781--1000): gluttony, idolatry, wishful thinking, scheming, jealousy, selfishness, exaggeration, rationalization, and unscrupulous exploitation of femininity to gain her own way. Most of the qualities mentioned are familiar, especially from medieval times, as faults traditionally common to women. More of the same kind of evidence may be shown from the weakness and unsoundness of Eve's reasonings after the Fall, when, though she shows a quite mature calm in some ways, she proposes such extreme measures as suicide or complete continence as solutions to the problem of the transmitted sin for which she and Adam will be responsible. While Adam agonizes over their future sin-tainted descendants, Eve's real concern is only for herself and her relationship to Adam, on whom she is utterly dependent.

One wonders if Milton found a therapeutic relief in his portrayal of Adam's rage at Eve after the Fall. Adam's-- and evidently Milton's-- disillusionment is complete when he speaks to Eve:

> Imagined wise,
> Constant, mature, proof against all assaults,

> And understood not all was but a shew
> Rather than solid vertu, all but a Rib
> Crooked by nature, bent, as now appears,
> More to the part sinister of me drawn.

Eve's whole joy had been in admiration of and submission to Adam, and now she is withered and blasted as Adam throws her off in terrible anger. Eve's desolation and Adam's rage: they do not make a pretty picture. Of course, in Milton's stern code of justice, it was not intended to be a pleasant situation, and it is soon alleviated, but one wonders if it is not an unnecessarily harsh conception to begin with. It is indeed an irony that Eve, who had been created expressly for Adam's comfort and the relief of his loneliness, should have been the cause of the Fall. One is reminded of the frequent affirmations in the divorce tracts (see, for example, the quotation on p. 46) that bitter disillusionment and bondage in wedlock is sufficient cause to drive a man to atheism.

Scholars have found it irresistible to speculate concerning the scene of the reconciliation between Adam and Eve. Was it patterned on the contrived reconciliation of Milton and Mary Powell? Again, in the absence of factual evidence, an answer can only be conjecture. Some say positively that it must have been, but very likely the idea that it was more of an idealization, a day-dream, so to speak, of what Milton would have liked as a method of reconciliation is nearer the truth.

Another interesting speculation concerns Milton's failure to emphasize the relationship between Eve and the Virgin Mary. Here, if Milton had desired it, would have been a magnificent way to redeem the character of Eve. Milton was aware of the parallel beyond doubt, as it had been developed at length in the church fathers. He does touch on the concept

twice, but only very briefly, as in the epithet "blest Marie, second Eve" (V, 387; also X, 183, and a line or two at XII, 600-601, 621-622). There are several places in the narrative where an exposition of this theme would have been quite appropriate (for example, in XII, at line 380 or 600), and one would think that the rich fabric of allusion and antithesis that could be woven around it would have appealed to Milton. A Roman critic (Mother Mary Christopher Pecheux) reads all this background into the two brief allusions,[1] but it is doubtful that this is justified. Then, why did Milton decline to use this material? One could cite his antipathy to the church fathers and his hatred of Roman Catholicism, but probably the main reason was that he did not wish to elevate the character of Eve, even indirectly through Mary; Adam is intended to be the primary figure of Paradise Lost.

The willingness of Milton to give Eve plausible and reputable motives may finally be cited as an evidence of respect for her (and, in a parallel situation, for Dalila also) as a person in her own right, although it must be remembered that it was part of Milton's usual dramatic technique to give the opposition a good case (for example, Satan and the fallen angels debating in Hell). Eve is given the privilege of using an argument very precious to Milton, the one which found its supreme expression in Areopagitica, that "fugitive and cloistered virtue" is worth little. It is a tribute to Milton, the artist of integrity, as well as to Milton, the chivalrous gentleman, that he is willing to let Eve use this argument and be proved wrong. He allows Adam to be extremely

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[1] "The Concept of the Second Eve in Paradise Lost," PMLA, LXXV (September, 1960), 359-366.

chivalrous also in choosing freely to share in Eve's trespass so as not to be separated from her. Many scholars see a close parallel between the reconciliation of Milton with Mary Powell and that of Adam with Eve, and again it is surely a tribute to the gallantry of both gentlemen that they were willing to be so reconciled, in spite of all the compelling negative circumstances.

Taking Paradise Lost as a whole, however, one is led to the conclusion that Adam loves Eve's beauty, her charming ways, her ability to satisfy his physical needs, to serve his comfort, and to be a sounding board for his expositions-- but that he does not really love her for her inner self, her essential dignity and integrity as a person. Indeed, in Milton's conception she is not intended to have an independent existence as a person. Her whole being is centered on Adam, and much of the time she shows little of the dignity of self-realization-- only a certain coy wiliness-- until the very end, when, in humiliation as well as humility, she attains a kind of sad maturity.

In Samson Agonistes, we have again, as in the divorce tracts and Paradise Lost, the picture of a man dedicated to God, this time not inexperienced, it is true, but nevertheless completely smitten with the physical appeal, "the fair fallacious looks" (l. 534), of a beautiful woman, and betrayed thereby. Dalila, by the very nature of her role as villainess of the piece, can hardly be pointed to as an example of Milton's high regard for womankind. Nevertheless, she possesses a certain dignity and presence, and her motives, including love of country and faithfulness to her religion, are more worthy than those in the Bible account. There is an interesting parallel between the situation of the Royalist Mary

Powell and that of the Philistine Dalila, both of whom were expected to throw over completely both religious and political convictions at marriage and adopt those of their husbands without reservation.

Dalila suffers the same kind of rough repulse that Eve did, and there is the same undertone, if anything more pronounced, of sadistic satisfaction in her complete repudiation and unmasking. Of course, Dalila is a much harder creature than Eve, and though she has beauty, she has much less softness and grace. The reasons for her sin include, as Milton has Dalila herself admit, such "common female faults" as curiosity, gossiping, weakness, jealousy, and possessiveness. But Dalila insists that she had a praiseworthy motive in betraying Samson to the Philistines; she was prompted by patriotism, or "civil duty," and religion (853-854), and these are not typically feminine motives. Samson, however, unwilling to recognise any good in her, accuses Dalila of falseness and pretense in advancing these motives; she then remarks bitterly, with more wisdom than she knew: "In argument with men a woman ever/ Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause." (903-4). Indeed, in Milton's hands, this seems assured.

Many critics believe that Samson Agonistes contains one of the most explicit expressions in any of Milton's writings of his own rancorous feelings about womankind, set down toward the end of a lifetime of mature reflection about the problem. Certainly one of the most bitter condemnations of women occurs when Samson has fiercely and finally thrown Dalila off, and the Chorus is prompted to consider the puzzling nature of women:

But what it is, hard to say,
Harder to hit, ...
. . . . .
Much like thy riddle, Samson,
. . . . .
Is it for that such outward ornament
Was lavish't on their Sex, that inward gifts
Were left for hast unfinish't, judgment scant,
Capacity not raised to apprehend
Or value what is best
In choice, but oftest to affect the wrong?
Or was it too much of self-love mixt,
Of constancy no root infixt,
That either they love nothing, or not long?
Whate're it be, to wisest men and best
Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,
Soft, modest, meek, demure,
Once join'd, the contrary she proves, a thorn
Intestin, far within defensive arms
A cleaving mischief, in his way to vertue
Adverse and turbulent, or by her charms
Draws him awry enslav'd
With dotage, and his sense deprav'd
To folly and shameful deeds which ruin ends.
(1014-1043)

This outburst is taken by many to be Milton's bitter valediction on the subject of women, the culminating expression of a lifetime of growing resentment. Equally harsh is the conclusion he reaches and enunciates in a speech of the chorus about the proper way to handle the perfidious female creature:

Therefore God's universal Law
Gave to the man despotic power
Over his female in due awe,
Nor from that right to part an hour,
Smile she or lowre:
So shall he least confusion draw
On his whole life, not sway'd
By female usurpation, nor dismay'd.
(1053-1060)

Note the implication of the phrase "least confusion draw," that some confusion is unavoidable from any entanglement with womankind, but it can

be kept to a minimum by the strict exercise of "despotic power." Perhaps some of the intensity of these pronouncements can be attributed to the dramatic situation; as we have seen, however, bitter outbursts of this general kind are to be found in Milton's writings of nearly thirty years before. The one safe conclusion to draw is that after his marriage Milton shows some degree of animosity toward women in all of his works which are concerned with the nature and role of women. Yet he continues to betray his susceptibility to their attractions and always insists that when they are properly fulfilling the role for which they were created they deserve honor and respect.

IV

Conclusion

We have thus found, in a previous section, that whereever in his mature writings one looks at Milton's treatment of women, one finds three attitudes present in some degree: fondness for female charm, honor and respect for his particular ideal of womanhood, and bitter harshness towards the failings of women. It is tempting to ask why Milton harbored an ugly grudge against women even though he also loved and respected them. Part of the answer is that obviously he had been influenced to some extend by the traditional view that woman was responsible for the downfall of man. Another part is that the bitter disappointment of his own first marriage left an indelible impression on his mind and art. Yet other writers have had unhappy marriages and have not felt impelled to wreak their vengeance on the whole sex through their literary art. Still another part lies in the high and serious concept of himself and his work that Milton held from early youth, an exalted sense of vocation not unrelated to pride--and pride is vulnerable to hurt.

But still another important part of the answer would seem to lie in the very order of the universe as Milton conceived it, or, to give it a proper name, the concept of Hierarchy. C. S. Lewis explains it thus:

> According to this conception degrees of value are objectively present in the universe. Everything except God has some natural superior; everything except unformed matter has some natural inferior.

> The goodness, happiness, and dignity of every being consists in obeying its natural superior and ruling its natural inferiors. [1]

Lewis points out that this point of view is not in the least peculiar to Milton: it has an ancestry of distinguished literary adherents extending back to Aristotle, but including especially many great writers and thinkers of the Renaissance. We may add that the Puritan philosophers had also made it a part of their doctrine, as, for example, in the passage quoted (p. 28) from Whately's Bride-Bush, where he cites "God's appointment, in the ordering of higher and lower places" as the reason women must accept their inferior status without question. But Lewis feels that for Milton

> The Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work, it foams and burgeons out at every moment....He pictures his whole universe as a universe of degrees, from root to stalk, from stalk to flower, from flower to breath, from fruit to human reason (V. 480). ... This is not the writing of a man who embraces the Hierarchical principle with reluctance, but rather of a man enchanted by it. [2]

A quite complete explanation of Milton's idea of Hierarchy is contained in the following words of the angel messenger in Paradise Lost:

> O Adam, one Almightie is, from whom
> All things proceed, and up to him return,
> If not deprav'd from good, created all
> Such to perfection, one first matter all,
> Indu'd with various forms, various degrees
> Of substance, and in things that live, of life;
> But more refin'd, more spiritous, and pure,

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[1] Lewis, p. 73.
[2] Ibid., p. 79-80.

As neerer to him plac't or neerer tending
Each in thir several active Sphears assignd,
Til body up to spirit work, in bounds
Proportiond to each kind. So from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
More aerie, last the bright consummate floure
Spirits odorous breathes: flours and thir fruit
Mans nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd
To vital Spirits aspire, to animal,
To intellectual, give both life and sense,
Fansie and understanding, whence the soule
Reason receives, and reason is her being,
Discursive, or Intuitive; discourse
Is oftest yours, the latter most is ours,
Differing but in degree, of kind the same.
(V, 469-490)

With this concept as a frame of reference, we can now see why the upsetting of the natural order was such a monstrous thing to Milton. Not only his personal sensibilities but also his intellectual ideals suffered a shattering blow. To Milton even one step down from his own exalted rank as a male is a place of rare privilege and honor in the scheme of things. Why it should not be more than enough to satisfy ungrateful womankind is simply beyond his comprehension, and Eve's and Dalila's trespass on the ground of male prerogative is a monstrosity full of catastrophe, inevitable from the nature of the universe.

The idea of Hierarchy is principally manifested in Milton's writings in his delineation of the role of woman. The whole concept is so basically and thoroughly a part of the very fabric of his work that it scarcely needs demonstration. The high but secondary position of woman has been discussed previously, but can be recalled briefly by such phrases as these from Tetrachordon: "the woman is not primarily and immediately the image of God, but in reference to the man"; "he not for her, but she for

him"; "subject to him"; "an inferior sex." [1] The same idea appears repeated in Paradise Lost (see pages 49-50). In Samson Agonistes the suffering caused be feminine "usurpation" is just as explicit as in Paradise Lost. Samson continually broods over his shame at letting Dalila rule him (lines 235, 410 ff.), and the humiliation of the idea of Dalila keeping him in semi-bondage (lines 920 ff.). The Chorus enunciates the stern principle which Samson learned with so much pain, and which has already been quoted (p.60) as Milton's bitter valediction to womankind.

The important factor which defines the various ranks in the harmonious order of this universe is the possession and exercise of right reason. We have already seen some evidences of the importance of reason to Milton in his handling of Biblical texts and in his humanistic insistence on the reasonableness of God. Man in the system of "degrees" is supremely in command of reason, while woman is weaker and to some extent ruled by passion. Saurat points out that to Milton woman is not capable of participating fully in reason because of her passionate role. Eve is swayed too easily by emotional appeals and is clearly Adam's intellectual inferior. Disaster comes, says Saurat, when Adam abdicates his primary role, the representative of reason.[2] Passion in the general sense, or even physical desire, is not evil to Milton, but it must be kept under the rule of reason (see Paradise Lost, IV, 299-311). Adam earns a brisk rebuke from the Angel when he confesses as early as Book VIII that "all higher knowledge in her presence falls/ Degraded... Authoritie and Reason on her waite" (551-554). Saurat pursues this

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[1] Patterson, p. 653.
[2] Saurat, p. 160.

thought and links it with Milton's ill feeling toward women:

> It (passion) is most capable of obliterating reason completely and of leading man to the worst folly. And in such obliteration is the abstract typical portrait of the Fall. Therefore there will ever remain in Milton a deep distrust of woman, the witness of the degradation. [1]

Thus, we have found Milton to be a man sorely tried, doubtless deeply hurt, by his personal experiences with women. We have seen evidences of several conflicting attitudes toward women, some pleasant and flattering, but others harsh and denigrating. We have examined evidence that the latter attitude was not uncommon in Milton's contemporaries and that elements of it are even found in the Bible. We have nevertheless found at least some indications that Milton's derogation goes beyond that of St. Paul and some of Milton's contemporaries, a circumstance the more surprising in view of the modernity of Milton's viewpoint in other areas. Thus, though such a proposition is incapable of actual proof, it would seem at least probable that the personal blow which Milton suffered in his own relationship with woman struck deep at the root of his convictions concerning the very order of the universe and damaged the balance of his outlook on womankind, despite his life-long natural ardor and his respect for the sex as second in dignity only to man among all earthly creatures.

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[1] Saurat, p. 154.

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